



Citizen Corps ~ Media Relations 101

The media are critical partners in communicating the message and mission of Citizen Corps, whether at the national, state, local or tribal level. When possible, include media representatives on your Council and develop an ongoing relationship with a range of media outlets within your community – print, radio, television, and advertising outlets, such as billboards. Reaching out to media is one of the best ways to increase awareness of your Citizen Corps activities and educate the public about preparedness measures, training opportunities, and volunteer programs.

In addition, of course, the media provide critical alerts and warnings to the public when a dangerous situation is imminent or recently occurred and provide ongoing information throughout a crisis. Having the media work in partnership with your Citizen Corps Council to improve community safety and to understand the emergency responder disciplines will pay dividends in any emergency situation. Consider offering training to media representatives – reporters and camera operators – who are likely to be in the midst of a hazardous situation, such as a fire or chemical spill. This will help education and protect a vulnerable group, will help foster the partnership, and will help get the word out about Citizen Corps when the media promotes their own training.

The tips that follow can help your Council develop relationships with reporters and can help you get a particular story published or aired. And be sure to ask if any of the members of your Council, or the organizations they represent, can offer additional public affairs or marketing support.

1. Create a Citizen Corps Media List

One of the most important tools you need to promote a story is an up-to-date Citizen Corps Media List. This list should include:

- ✓ Name of the Media Outlet
- ✓ Publication Frequency (daily, weekly, bi-monthly, monthly, quarterly)
- ✓ Journalist's Name, Title and Contact Information (phone, email, fax, address)
- ✓ Preferred Time/Method of Contact (if this information is available)

To start your list, collect the names of local news outlets that have good circulation and that reach your target audience, include newspapers and radio/TV stations, but also local bulletins or neighborhood publications, organization newsletters, such as businesses, hospitals, women's centers, health care clinics, professional associations, churches and other faith-based institutions, drug stores, and local civic clubs. And be sure to include specialized media on your list, such as African-American, Hispanic/Latino, or other minority newspapers or radio stations. If you are in a large media market, consider adding bureaus of national news services, such as the Associated Press and Reuters.

Next, identify the names of reporters that cover emergency preparedness and community/metro issues. If possible, learn about a reporter's preferred method of contact – email or phone and be familiar with deadlines / lead times (how far in advance you need to notify them about your story/event). Also try to familiarize yourself with the reporter's work – read past articles, watch their segments on the news.



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Some media websites list the types of stories their reporters cover, but you can also get this information by calling the media outlet's main number and asking which reporters cover topics relevant to your Citizen Corps activities. If you are in a large media market, you might also consider purchasing a media directory or editorial calendar from Bacon's Media Source, www.bacons.com, or check your local libraries to see if they subscribe. This company provides detailed information about media outlets, journalists, their coverage area and preferences for being contacted.

2. Develop a newsworthy angle

To increase a reporter's interest, tie your message to existing local and national news stories, anniversaries, holidays, or statewide initiatives. For example, reporters are likely to write articles and columns regarding New Year's resolutions at the first of the year. Take this opportunity reiterate the importance of preparedness and the steps everyone should resolve to take to be safer. Specific examples of thematic "hooks" you can use to promote the Citizen Corps mission are included in the Citizen Corps Outreach Calendar of Events.

Within the context of Citizen Corps' general mission of public awareness and citizen participation, be sure to develop a specific message appropriate for the event. Are you trying to raise awareness about safety and preparedness regarding a specific hazard or community concern? Are you trying to attract volunteers? Are you announcing a training opportunity? Are you fundraising? Are you encouraging neighborhood preparedness? Are you recognizing how citizens have contributed to emergency services?

And in addition to planned activities, such as community safety fairs, youth/school training programs, or community exercises, be prepared to promote any role that Citizen Corps program volunteers play during a disaster or crisis in response or recovery activities.

3. Know your chain of command and get approvals

Before contacting the media (pitching, sending out a pitch letter, media advisory or press release), be sure your Citizen Corps Council – and local government sponsor – have given their final approval. Be extra careful to double check the accuracy of statistics, quotes and contact information. For example, if the Mayor or a Police Chief is quoted, be sure you have coordinated with the appropriate offices. If your press release includes information about local fire safety efforts, be sure to get feedback from your local fire department before contacting reporters.

4. Line up your spokesperson(s)

The best way for a reporter to flesh out a story is to be able to interview sources directly involved in the event, such as Council members, local officials, volunteers, or community members that have been assisted by the Council's event or activity. Identify and get approval for spokespersons BEFORE you contact the media. This way you will be able to use their availability in your pitch. Then be sure your spokespersons are well prepared to deliver your message. Please refer to the Citizen Corps ~ Media Spokesperson Tips for suggestions.



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5. Contacting the Media.

Pitching. Pitching is defined as persuading a journalist to cover your organization, event, or cause, using an angle or “hook” to encourage interest.

Preparation. As with most things, you will generally be more successful if you practice! First, draft a brief script – usually three to four short sentences – containing the vital information you’d like to get across for the specific story. Be sure to include only the most interesting and important points, key messages, and potent statistics. And be sure to end with your specific request that they cover the story – write an article or op-ed, send a camera crew.

Anticipate questions from the reporter, such as: Why is your story newsworthy? Why should it be covered now? Try to think about what might be considered “newsworthy” – examples include: new research or results of a pilot, local relevance/human interest, seasonal or timely relevance, the involvement of celebrities or elected officials, and controversy. If you have a disaster in your area, be sure to ask the media to focus on preparedness and mitigation success stories – examples of where people avoided or reduced damage or suffering because they took steps ahead of time.

Making the Call. Once you feel fully comfortable with the message and delivery, start making calls. But be sure to also practice what you’ll say if you have to leave a message on voicemail – remember to be brief, speak slowly and don’t forget to leave your name and contact information!

Timing is everything. If you do not have an existing relationship with the reporter, you will have about 30 seconds to get his/her attention. Get to the point quickly! Always ask a reporter if they are on deadline before you begin. If they are, ask when a better time would be to call. For radio and TV, be sure not to call while the reporter is on the air!

	<i>Best Time to Pitch</i>	<i>Pitch Tips for this Medium</i>
<i>Radio</i>	Radio hosts are often on the air from early in the morning, until about 9:00am. Try to reach them after their morning show is over, but before they leave for the day, often by 10:00 or 11:00 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When pitching radio, try to get air time during “drive time,” either morning or evening commute – this will reach the largest audience.



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<i>Television</i>	Television stations tend to meet in the morning (while this varies, it is often between 8:00 and 9:30 am); try reaching reporters just after their morning meeting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be sure to discuss visual opportunities that will help them tell the story (such as coverage of a community Kids Safety Day, to include interviews with kids and uniformed emergency responders doing demonstrations) and mention suggested spokespeople who could talk on camera.• A prominent official can also help draw television coverage.
<i>Print (Newspapers, Magazines, Newsletters, Trade Publications)</i>	The best time to call print reporters is during the late morning hours. While newspaper reporters do not get to work very early, by the afternoon, they are scrambling to make their deadlines, so try to avoid calling after 3:00 pm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When pitching over the telephone, be polite, to-the-point, and enthusiastic.• Be prepared to offer to send additional information in writing via e-mail, fax, or traditional mail.• Offer to make their job easier by arranging an interview, facilitating access to the venue, and tracking down statistics or other information.

The next few steps talk about *Pitch Letters*, *Media Advisories*, and *Press Releases*. While each of these documents may sound similar to the many people, they each have specific purposes and are distributed to the media at different points along the event-planning/media relations process.

Pitch Letter. If you are pitching a scheduled event, consider sending out pitch letters at least three weeks before your event. This is an introductory letter, introducing yourself, creating a “hook,” explaining why the journalist should cover your story, and offering people for the journalist to interview. Also indicate that you will follow up the next week with a phone call. If the reporter does get the chance to see your letter, your follow up call will not be a complete “cold call,” which may help your call be more productive and fruitful. Advice on writing a pitch letter developed by the Ad Council is attached here.



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Media Advisory. If your story includes an event, such as a press conference with local leaders, a training class, or an exercise, that warrants on-site media, also consider sending out a media advisory at least one week before to ensure that the media outlets have all the necessary information. These documents are simple to write and typically include the basic “Who, What Where When and Why.” The goal of the media advisory is not to tell the complete story, but instead to entice media to attend your event to learn more.



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After you email or fax the media advisory, contact reporters by phone to determine their interest in attending or covering the event. This type of personally effort often can make a difference in generating media interest.



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Press release. A press release is a formal announcement about a particular event, activity, announcement, or findings that is written in the form of a news article and given to the media to generate or encourage publicity. A few tips for writing press releases are to:

- Remember the basics: who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Write simply, keeping the release to one page if possible and no more than two.
- Use an eye-catching headline.
- Write like a reporter: hook the reader with the enticing, important information first, then follow with the details. Remember, news organizations may use portions of your press release directly in their story.
- Include quotations from relevant leaders to underscore the salient points of the event or announcement.
- Be sure to include a point of contact at your organization – complete with a phone number and e-mail address – for reporters' inquiries and requests for interviews.

Advice on writing a strong press release is provided in the attached template prepared by the Ad Council.



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Press releases should be sent out the day before you want your story to be published or the day before your event takes place. Send the press release to your Citizen Corps Media List (or a subset of that list if your story has a limited focus) and post it on your website.

6. Working with the Media at your Event/Press Conferences.

Day of the Event: There is a lot to do on the day of an event. No matter what, stay calm, stay organized, be friendly and most importantly, stay on message!!

- Determine the three key points of your story/event that you want to communicate.
- Prepare talking points to ensure that these messages are concisely and consistently presented.
- Keep spokespeople to a minimum. More than one spokesperson can sometimes mean that more than one message gets communicated. Make sure anyone in contact with the media has access to the same set of talking points.



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- Prepare media packets and include fact sheets (to include relevant/interesting statistics), program information about your Citizen Corps Council and the event itself, bios where applicable, a copy of your press release and a contact card.
- Set up a media table for check-in and to distribute press kits and schedule post-event/press conference interview times.
- Have a representative escort the media to the designated press area so they can set up their cameras and microphones.
- Make sure to introduce the press to the identified spokespeople!
- At all times, remain calm, cool and collected!!

7. Follow-up.

Thank you. Always thank the reporter and cultivate the relationship for future stories. Even if they don't cover your story, if you are pleasant to work with, straightforward with you information and reliable, they will remember you the next time. If your story is covered, track your press coverage, keep newspaper and video clips. Track any feedback or results from the coverage, such as an increase in volunteer interest or an increase in inquiries about safety / preparedness / mitigation measures. And keep the media informed of your progress for a follow up story! Who knows – if you develop a relationship with a reporter, they might even do a regular Citizen Corps Column!!

Consider alternatives. If the reporter decides not to cover your story, consider submitting an op-ed, letter to the editor, or requesting a briefing to the editorial board. Find out the publication's requirements for such pieces and craft a well-timed article/letter "authored" by a community leader. As with pitching, tying your piece to current news stories or anniversaries will increase the chances of placement. Make sure you adhere to standard word limits; letters-to-the-editor should be kept to 250 words and editorials should be no more than 750 words. Anything longer than that will be edited and you won't have control over what they take out!

The media can be your greatest asset in getting the word out about your Citizen Corps Council's activities in the community. Treating the media with respect and honesty can lead to a powerful relationship to help the residents of your community be safer and better prepared for any emergency!